



Does waste in harbor cloud liveaboard issue?

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Jun 29 2005

Citing 'raw sewage,' a citizen group tries to rally shoreline residents to oust boat-dwellers.

It's time residents got the straight poop on Eagle Harbor's sewage levels, say many island liveaboards. Long dogged by accusations that they dump buckets of waste into the harbor, liveaboards were particularly incensed by a letter recently stuffed into the newspaper boxes of harbor residents.

"Did you know that 30 people are dumping raw sewage into Eagle Harbor every day?" wrote property rights advocate Gary Tripp in the letter's first line.

Tripp, who is suing the state to remove anchored and moored liveaboards from the harbor's center, goes on to admonish the city and state for not enforcing rules requiring liveaboards to reside in regulated marinas.

Tripp also contended in the letter that the harbor's environmental health is at peril due to the liveaboards' waste.

"It will be very expensive to make Eagle Harbor pristine again," he wrote.

But government studies show that most human waste in the harbor is not coming from the estimated 25 liveaboards, but from shoreline residents.

"People should be concerned about raw sewage, but they should know that most of it is coming from the land," Harbormaster Tami Allen said. "It's really a watershed issue, and people really need to pay attention to what they do to their lawns with chemicals, what they do near streams and how their septic systems are operating."

Allen conducted a series of water quality tests in 2003 that showed fecal levels in Eagle Harbor spiked during a heavy rain – up to 63 fecal colony forming units per 100 milliliter of saltwater in some areas.

But, according to Allen's study, a typical day in the harbor produced under one or up to seven CFUs. These findings led Allen to conclude that the higher levels of fecal coliform were largely due to land-based runoff during rain.

Levels under 70 CFUs are considered safe for humans under government guidelines.

An earlier study conducted in 1997 by the Kitsap County Health District showed fecal levels topping 1600 CFUs from samples taken near freshwater drainages on the harbor's south shore.

It is unknown just how high the fecal level may have ranged because the district doesn't test any higher than 1600 CFUs.

"It maxed our scale," said health district water quality specialist Stuart Whitford. "At that bacteria level, a child walking on a beach coming into contact would have had a high risk of contracting a waterborne illness, such as diarrhea, or ear and eye infections."

Almost 30 samples taken in the inner-harbor typically drew an average of 11 CFUs, he said, showing a much lower level where many boats are anchored or moored.

The health district's results spurred multiple investigations into residential sewage leaks and a slew of citations that spurred many land owners to clean up their waste disposal systems.

But the liveaboards don't get off scott free, Whitford said.

"We've had complaints, and we've seen a bucket that washed up on a beach with feces in it," he said. Allen said most liveaboards adhere to proper sewage disposal and regularly call her when the city's pump-out facility at the public dock is full or out of order.

Many liveaboards say they row waste buckets for disposal daily or have holding tanks that are regularly vacuumed out.

Some even use it to grow flowers.

"I have an electric composting toilet," said 12-year harbor liveaboard Ray Nowak. "There's no waste, no water used, no odor. It's powered with solar panels and it makes great fertilizer once a month for my friend's garden."

"I do what I have to do, as we all have to do, but I use what I do to fertilize Mother Earth."

Nowak calls Tripp's letter a "blind accusation" based on little understanding of the liveaboard lifestyle.

"His campaign makes me angry and saddened, but also really intrigued," he said. "I want to know just what's driving him. I'd like to talk face-to-face with him and if he wants to leave the world of mortgages and condos and petroleum, I'd welcome him with open arms to come live down here with us in the harbor."

In an interview this week, Tripp said he's unlikely to take Nowak up on his offer.

"State law says people living there are illegally trespassing," Tripp said. "Their boats must have sealed tanks and must use pump-out facilities. None of these things are being done."

The city is in the process of crafting an "open water marina" that would meet new state regulatory guidelines and allow some liveaboards to remain in portions of the inner harbor.

But Tripp, and members of his Bainbridge Citizens group, say the city should move fast.

He expects the lawsuit to have its first hearing in the next few months. In his letter, he urges harbor landowners to send money to help pay the mounting legal expenses.

"It's not cheap to sue the state and we'll need a lot of money to win," Tripp said.

Liveaboard and University of Washington student Amelia Sericova said Tripp's position is "totally unfounded," but follows a general scatological fixation other shore dwellers seem to have with liveaboards.

"That's the first thing people ask when I tell them I live aboard a sailboat," she said. "It's always about poop. People are obsessed with our poop."